

Ex-offenders get help to make most of their freedom



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The road to redemption for an ex-convict can start with something as simple as an ID card.

An expo planned for North Chicago Tuesday is meant to help former offenders get their lives back on track, officials say, by filling basic needs like getting identification and finding a place to live.

Up to 500 people on parole or probation are expected to attend the Summit of Hope, where state and social service agencies and employers will try to link up those who've had scrapes with the law with services or jobs, officials said.

The Illinois Department of Corrections holds the expo every month or two at various locations around the state, but this is the first time it's been held in Lake County, coordinator Marcus King said.

The gathering is by invitation only, and because some participants have kids with them, sex offenders are excluded, King said.

Services to be offered include help getting transportation, food, clothing, shelter, child support, health care screenings and referrals, veterans' information, social security, education and job training. Faith-based groups will also try to help offenders find their way.

The rate of recidivism, or re-offending, remained at a too-high 47 percent as of 2012, the most recent year reported, corrections officials said.

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The expo is important for helping people who sometimes had trouble with basic skills like reading even before they were incarcerated, said John Maki, executive director of the John Howard Association of Illinois, a criminal justice reform group.

“Prison takes you out of the business of everyday life, from paying bills to going to work,” Maki said. “When parolees are involved in the world in a meaningful, productive way, they are far less likely to recidivate.”

The summit comes as recent legislation has aimed to help people with criminal records. Last month, Governor Pat Quinn signed a law requiring employers to determine applicants’ qualifications for a job before asking whether they have a criminal record.

The state also passed legislation last year to increase tax breaks for businesses that hire qualified ex-offenders, and to facilitate the expunging of some criminal records.